

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 27

THE ATLANTIC
December 1979

THE MAIL

R Powers, Thomas
CASTRO, Fidel
Kennedy, Robert F.
~~Robert F. Kennedy~~
CIA 5.03.2

RFK AND THE CIA

SIR: Thomas Powers continues to take the cheap and easy shot at the late Robert F. Kennedy, claiming that he participated in or approved plots by the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro ("Inside the Department of Dirty Tricks," August *Atlantic*).

"The record is clear," says your author, that RFK was thoroughly briefed about the details of the plot to kill Castro and that he "did not protest to the CIA . . . about that attempt." In fact, Powers's version of the record is distorted and incomplete. Then Attorney General Kennedy was briefed about the CIA-Mafia plot after the fact; he was told (falsely) that the plot had ceased; he ordered that no such further attempts be made; but attempts continued despite his orders that they cease. The testimony of the CIA's general counsel to the Church Committee—the very account Powers distorts—is that of a man angry to hear that the attempt had been made, coldly furious that the Mafia had been enlisted, but lied to that the effort had ceased.

Both of us had occasion later to discuss the matter with Senator Kennedy. It was clear that he continued to believe that his opposition was largely responsible for the project's end.

It was even more clear to us, through close association over the years, that Senator Kennedy was an intensely moral man, and—in a curious, old-fashioned sense—a courageous and chivalrous man, to whose spirit nothing would be more antithetical than an assassination. It was bad enough that CIA officials lied to him in 1962; it is outrageous for that lie, and its concomitant slander of a dead man, to be covered up by this kind of journalism in 1979.

FRANK MANKIEWICZ
ADAM WALINSKY
Washington, D.C.

Thomas Powers replies:

President Kennedy inherited the Bay of Pigs project from Eisenhower, but Operation Mongoose was his own creation, and it had no more vigorous proponent in the Administration than Robert F. Kennedy. Mankiewicz and Walinsky describe RFK as an "intensely moral man" as well as "courageous and chivalrous." Maybe so, but these admirable qualities did not temper his pressure on the CIA for ever larger and more destructive terrorist attacks against Cuba—a nation with which we were not at war, and which had certainly given us no cause for belligerence, unless humiliation be considered a cause. There was no clear strategy behind these attacks—or at least none I could discover—but RFK pushed them personally, regularly called up CIA officers to say he wanted more of them, sometimes checked on the progress of operations hour by hour. Kennedy gave Mongoose his full energy and attention. It was not a joke. A great many people were killed during this disgraceful period; nothing whatever was gained by it, and it's hard to see that it was motivated by anything except pique and arrogance. An assessment of Kennedy's character must take this episode into account; indeed, one evidence of his capacity for growth was the fact that he later felt ashamed of what he had done. The question of RFK's responsibility for CIA attempts to murder Castro cannot be settled by reference to his character alone.